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SUBJECT: HIGH RISK OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS FOR RURAL
ETHIOPIAN GIRLS

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Rural Ethiopian girls are more at risk of having their rights violated compared to the general Ethiopian population due to harmful traditional practices and cultural attitudes towards females. While there are laws in place to protect girls from some rights violations, the laws are not enforced in most cases. Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of early marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa; the median age of marriage for rural Ethiopian girls is 16.5 years, despite Ethiopian law which sets the legal marriage age at 18. Most

early marriages do not involve consent of the bride, though this is mandated by law. Although illegal, female genital mutilation (FGM) is widely practiced, with a prevalence rate of 45.8 percent. Only 35 percent of rural Ethiopian girls are literate, and over 40 percent never attend school; those who attend do so for an average of only two years. Child labor laws are generally not enforced, resulting in significant numbers of adolescent (aged 10-19) domestic workers in Addis Ababa who work an average of 64 hours per week for USD 6 per month. Adolescent domestic workers are at a higher risk for HIV infection and physical/sexual violence.

Pastoralist girls from the Afar and Somali regions face an increased risk of undergoing FGM and have higher maternal mortality rates, lower school attendance rates, and higher prevalence of early marriage than the general Ethiopian female population. The scarcity of police and other law enforcement officials in the Afar and Somali regions leaves enforcement of legal frameworks protecting pastoralist girls largely to male-dominated traditional institutions that reinforce cultural norms by applying traditional and customary law. Recently passed legislation restricting funding for civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in human rights advocacy is having a detrimental effect on the ability of many CSOs to protect girls' rights. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On October 20, PolOff attended a conference in Addis Ababa entitled "Empowering Rural Ethiopian Girls." Several Ethiopian and international NGO representatives working directly with rural girls in Ethiopia attended the conference. This cable includes information collected through discussions PolOff had with these individuals and also includes recent research findings presented at the conference. Individual statements made below without express sourcing can be traced to one of these authoritative sources.

Harmful Traditional Practices: Early Marriage and FGM

13. (SBU) According to a 2006 study by International Family Planning Perspectives (IFPP), Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of early marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa. Nineteen percent of Ethiopian girls are married before their 15th birthday, in violation of Ethiopian law which sets the legal marriage age at 18. The median age of marriage for rural Ethiopian girls is 16.5 years. Though the Ethiopian constitution states that "marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses," most early marriages do not involve the consent of the bride.

A Population Council study among adolescent girls in the Amhara region found that only 15 percent of married girls had consented to be married. Further, 81 percent of married girls aged 10-19 in the sample reported that their first sexual intercourse occurred against their will.

14. (SBU) The prevalence of early marriage is highest in the central and northern regions of Ethiopia. In these regions, girls are traditionally expected to be married before or at the time of puberty. In the Amhara region, 50 percent of girls are married by the age of 15 and 80 percent by the age of 18, according to the 2006 IFPP study. Parents often choose to marry daughters early because of the risk of loss of virginity, economic gain (bride price), and perceived inability to refuse the suitor's family (cultural norm). Marriage also builds alliances between families, contributes to the status of the parents, and relieves the economic cost of raising and feeding the girl. Many rural Ethiopians believe that a girl who is not married by late adolescence represents a failure and disgrace to the family. Early marriage often results in adolescent pregnancy, which subjects the mother to increased risk of obstructed labor, obstetric fistula, and death.

15. (SBU) Marriage by abduction, the forceful subjugation of a girl into marriage, is a serious problem in rural Ethiopia. According to a 2007 Population Council study, there was a 21.4 percent nationwide prevalence rate of marriage by abduction in 2007. If a girl or her family refuses a suitor's marriage proposal, the suitor may forcibly take the girl from the village and rape her. The next day they return to the village and village elders make the marriage official. The girl's family usually does not protest since the girl is no longer a virgin and hence undesired by other suitors. This problem has decreased recently (down from 33.1 percent in 1997) with increased cooperation from police and faster court decisions punishing perpetrators; however, it still remains a serious problem.

16. (SBU) Female genital mutilation (FGM) is illegal in Ethiopia, though punishment is mild, with a minimum of three months imprisonment and USD 40 fine for perpetrators, and maximum of three months imprisonment and USD 40 fine for parents or others who act as accomplices. FGM can cause bleeding, infection, complicated labor, fistula, diminished sexual attraction, and death of the victim. Though the nationwide prevalence rate of FGM has declined from 60 to 45.8 percent from 1997 to 2007, according to a 2007 Population Council study, in the Somali region the rate has remained constant at about 70 percent. Improvement in the enforcement of laws prohibiting FGM has had the unintended consequence of increasing the rate of clandestine FGM procedures. Government health extension workers, located in every kebele (district), serve as watchdogs for harmful traditional practices, alerting police of violations.

Educational Opportunities Limited

17. (SBU) According to a 2004 Population Council study, 35 percent of rural Ethiopian girls were literate (Note: The same study found that 92 percent of urban boys were literate. End Note.) Over 40 percent of rural girls never attend school; those who do attend do so for an average of only two years. For many girls, inability to pay school fees (poor families prefer to send boys) and early marriage often

interrupt their education. One half of the girls who attend school start late - between the ages of eight and ten - and another 30 percent begin after the age of ten. Rural parents cite the need for girls' household help and the futility of sending girls to school as reasons for the low enrollment. Girls who attend school often face additional hardships, including no parental support and no time for homework because of household chores (typically fetching firewood and water), further decreasing their chances for success. Menstruation also often causes absence from school, since most girls do not own underwear and have no access to feminine hygiene products.

Domestic Servants and Pastoralist Girls Particularly Vulnerable

18. (SBU) Certain groups of girls are particularly marginalized, including urban adolescent domestic workers and pastoralist girls from the Afar and Somali regions. Ethiopian law stipulates that it is illegal for children below the age of 14 years to be engaged in wage labor. Special provisions apply for working children aged 14-18, including stipulation of a maximum of seven working hours per day, and prohibition of work before six a.m. or after 10 p.m. However, laws against child labor are not enforced. A 2007 Population Council study indicated that 15 percent of the female adolescent population (aged 10-19) in Addis Ababa worked as domestic servants, most of whom were trafficked from rural areas, though some migrated freely. The same study indicated that adolescent domestic workers worked extremely long hours (average 64 hours per week) with a mean income of approximately USD 6 per month. (Note: In Ethiopia, domestic work is considered to be among the lowest status work of all occupations and the most poorly paid. End Note.) Likely due to their heavy work burdens, limited free time, and restrictions by their employers, domestic servants are largely absent from governmental and non-governmental programs.

19. (SBU) Rural families are frequently supportive of their daughters' migration to Addis Ababa and other urban centers to become domestic workers because they feel that employers will give the girl a good home and better opportunities. While there is a tradition in Ethiopia of urban families taking in rural relatives to enable them to receive a better education, many girls are trafficked by a broker or family member who fraudulently misrepresents the opportunities that will be provided to the child. In such cases, promises of good schools and light housework result in forced labor and poorer living conditions than the child faced in the countryside. The following is a testimony from a ten year old domestic worker who migrated to Addis Ababa at the age of nine: "Since my parents were not able to educate and raise me, I came to Addis Ababa to work as a domestic worker. When I was there (in the rural area), I used to herd cattle for people and since life didn't go well for me and since they made me do things that were too much for me, I came to Addis Ababa to work as a domestic worker."

10. (SBU) A 2007 Population Council study found that adolescent domestic workers were less likely to be educated or to live with parents compared with other categories of adolescents, making them more vulnerable to physical/sexual abuse and HIV/AIDS than other adolescents. The HIV epidemic in Ethiopia is increasingly urban and female, according to a 2005 Central Statistics Authority survey. Nearly eight percent of urban females were living with HIV in 2005, compared to two percent of urban males. Some areas in Addis Ababa, such as Mercato, a large central market area, are destinations for the poorest migrant girls from rural areas, who are often absorbed initially into domestic service. Some of these girls eventually drift into sex work. Several flower plantations in Ethiopia employ large numbers of adolescent girls, many of whom have fled early marriage or who were sent by their families to generate income. At the

flower plantations, girls live without parents in small rented rooms shared with several other females and males. Due to their increased vulnerability, the HIV/AIDS rate among these girls is significantly higher than among the general population.

¶11. (SBU) Pastoralist girls from the Afar and Somali regions face an increased risk of undergoing FGM and have higher maternal mortality rates, lower school attendance rates, and higher prevalence of early marriage than the general female population, according to a 2007 Population Council study. The scarcity of police and other law enforcement officials in the region leaves the enforcement of legal frameworks protecting pastoralist girls largely to traditional institutions. The male-dominated traditional institutions often reinforce discriminatory cultural norms by implementing traditional and customary law.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Recently passed legislation restricting funding for civil society organizations (CSOs) that engage in activities that promote human rights is having a detrimental effect on CSOs' ability to protect girls' rights. In February, the Ethiopian Parliament adopted the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law), which prohibits CSOs that receive more than 10 percent of their funding from foreign sources from engaging in activities that promote human rights, specifically including the rights of children and the disabled and equality among nations, nationalities, people, gender, and religion. Several of the CSOs present at the conference told PolOff that they have had to disengage in advocacy work and focus their activities on service-delivery. Many expressed frustration and uncertainty about their organizations' futures. End Comment.
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